

Lynn C. Woolsey

1937–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

1993–



Image courtesy of the Member

As a working single mother, LYNN WOOLSEY spent several years receiving public assistance to help make ends meet while she raised three small children. “I know what it means to have a safety net when you need help getting back on your feet,” Woolsey recalled. “I can go to Washington and say, ‘I’ve been there.’”¹ Describing herself as the “first former welfare mom to serve in Congress,” Representative Woolsey has focused on issues facing children and families since her first election to the House of Representatives in 1992.

Lynn Woolsey was born in Seattle, Washington, on November 3, 1937. She graduated from Lincoln High School in Seattle. She attended the University of Washington from 1955 to 1957, but left school to be married, settling in northern California in Marin County, just north of San Francisco. She had three children—Joseph, Ed, and Amy—before her husband left the family in the late 1960s. Following her divorce, Woolsey found a secretarial job at a local high-tech company, but was forced to accept welfare assistance for childcare and health care. She eventually became a human resources manager at her company and, in 1980, opened her own business. She remarried, and raised another child, Michael. Woolsey also returned to college and earned a bachelor of science degree from the University of San Francisco in 1980. Woolsey first entered elective politics in 1984, when she won a seat on the city council of Petaluma, in Sonoma County. She served on the city council until 1992, holding the post of vice mayor for the last year of her tenure.

In 1992, when five-term incumbent Representative Barbara Boxer decided to run for the U.S. Senate, Woolsey entered the race to succeed her. The district encompassed the two counties just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, Marin County and most of Sonoma County, one of the nation’s most affluent areas. She won a crowded Democratic primary with 26 percent of the vote (to her nearest competitor’s 19 percent). In the general election against her Republican opponent,

a California assemblyman, Woolsey won with 65 percent of the vote. Re-elected in 1994 with 58 percent of the vote, Woolsey was returned to office in the next five elections by comfortable margins. In 2004, she was elected to the 109th Congress (2005–2007) with 72 percent of the vote.²

When Woolsey claimed her seat in the House in January 1993 at the start of the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), she received assignments on three committees: Budget, Government Operations, and Education and Labor (later renamed Education and the Workforce). In the 104th Congress (1995–1997), she left Government Operations, and in the 106th Congress (1999–2001) she was reassigned from the Budget Committee to the Science Committee. By the 108th Congress, she was the Ranking Member on the Education and Workforce Subcommittee on Education Reform.

From her seat on the Education and Workforce Committee, Woolsey has positioned herself as one of the foremost advocates of education issues in Congress. Drawing on her experience, she was a Democratic spokesperson during the mid-1990s welfare reform debates; and she was sharply critical of legislation that reduced the scope of many programs and placed lifetime limits on benefits. Representative Woolsey also has been a proponent of expanding childcare programs and supporting paid parental leave programs. In the 105th Congress (1997–1999), during the renewal of legislation on child nutrition, Woolsey inserted an amendment to expand school breakfast programs for all children and to make teenagers eligible for after-school snack programs. In the 106th Congress, she sponsored a measure that required the IRS to help enforce the payment of child support. In the 106th and 107th Congresses, she introduced her “Go, Girl” measure to encourage young girls to study science and math.³ She now leads in an effort to bring U.S. troops home from Iraq.

Congresswoman Woolsey also has attended to her northern California constituents’ range of needs—economic, medical, and environmental. She has delivered hundreds of millions of dollars to her district for a variety of capital-intensive projects: \$9 million for a Petaluma River flood control project, \$8.7 million for a major highway study and plan, and \$52 million for a seismic retrofit of the Golden Gate Bridge.⁴ During the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Woolsey worked to secure funding for breast cancer research, partly, to analyze the unusually high rate of the disease in Marin County. She is a proponent of export subsidies for wineries, which are a major Sonoma County industry. Representative Woolsey also has worked to expand the perimeter of the Point Reyes National Seashore, which is in her district.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, “Lynn C. Woolsey,”
<http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

- 1 Jane Gross, “Running on Experience: On Welfare, Then Off It,” 16 June 1992, *New York Times*: A16. See also, Carolyn Lochhead, “Ex-Welfare Mom Takes Congress to Task; Lawmaker Draws on Experience,” 10 March 1994, *San Francisco Chronicle*: A4.
- 2 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 3 *Politics in America*, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 79; *Almanac of American Politics*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2001): 175.
- 4 Pamela J. Podger, “Woolsey Smokes Challenger in Primary,” March 6, 2002, *San Francisco Chronicle*: A24.